

World Council of Churches
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

*Faith and Order Plenary Commission
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
28 July - 6 August 2004*

Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and the Search for the Unity of the Church

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to offer a brief outline of the origin, process and method adopted in the study entitled 'Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and the Search for the Unity of the Church', and to communicate to members of the Plenary Commission some of the results of this study to date, as well as plans for further work and publications. The study (also known by the abbreviated title ETHNAT) belongs to a series of Faith and Order programmes linking the search for the unity of the Church to the specific contexts in which the churches live and carry out their witness, mission and service to the world. In this respect, the continuity between this study and earlier work undertaken by Faith and Order was highlighted in one of the first papers to be produced in connection with the programme:

Since its beginnings Faith and Order, as an intrinsic part of its work for visible Christian unity, has wrestled with themes of church and world. This has been *necessary*, first because the divisions within and among churches reflect not only theological and ecclesiological differences, but also, and often more pervasively and destructively, divisions within the human community. Second, and more fundamentally, the work to overcome Christian divisions occurs within a much larger context, namely God's intention for unity and reconciliation among all of humankind, and indeed within the whole of creation. The search for Christian unity can be properly understood only within this larger context.¹

At its meeting in Dunblane, Scotland (1990) the Board of Faith and Order authorised the publication of the study document *Church and World*² and agreed that an extended study should be undertaken which would explore issues of ethnic and national identities in relation to the search for the unity of the Church. Therefore, since its launch at the meeting of Standing Commission held in Fontgombault, France in 1997, Faith and Order has been pursuing this study programme in collaboration with the World Council of Churches' team on Justice, Peace and Creation. The significance and timeliness of this study process is attested by the fact that it is being conducted during a decade when the churches have become increasingly aware of their responsibility in situations of tension and conflict related to ethnic and national identities; consideration is given to the ways in which nationalism and ethnicity can maintain, and even intensify, divisions within and among churches. The ETHNAT study consequently aims at addressing the churches' need for resources that would help them understand their role and involvement in such situations, and to enhance their witness for justice and reconciliation.

¹ T.F. Best & A. Falconer, 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Relation to Christian Unity', Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, 8-15 January 1997, *Abbaye de Fontgombault, France*, Faith and Order Paper No. 178, Geneva, Commission on Faith and Order, 1997, p. 38.

² *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, Faith and Order Paper No. 151, 2nd revised printing, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990.

The Goals of the Study

The aims of the ETHNAT study, as approved by the Standing Commission of Faith and Order,³ are as follows:

- To enable the churches to understand the role of ethnic and national identity in their own lives, in their relationships as churches, and in their societies;
- To renew the churches through a continuing search for visible unity
 - which challenges any relationship between Christian faith and ethnic or national identity that prevents unity, causes disunity, and hinders the healing of historic divisions; and
 - which calls them to transcend their divisions and the fragmentation of their societies;
- To equip the churches to become an effective prophetic sign of the unity and renewal of a renewed human community;
- To help the churches to act as agents of reconciliation in local situations of tension and conflict, including through the production of study materials for local use.

The Process and Method of the Study

The study has, from the beginning, been informed by two important assumptions. First, the ambivalence of the roles played by ethnic and national identities in the search for Christian unity is acknowledged, namely as an essential and positive component of human identity, but sometimes as a source for division, tension and conflict within the human community. Secondly, it is recognized that Christian unity need not mean the loss of identity, but can enrich existing ethnic and national identities.

The primary aim of the first ETHNAT meeting, held in **Hawarden, Wales (1997)**, was to determine the goals, overall structure, process and method of the study, and to identify specific topics and themes that are both essential to the study and require further exploration. Many of the themes already identified at that meeting have continued to figure prominently in subsequent ETHNAT consultations: the nature of human identity, the nature of the church as local and universal, the role of land as contested and shared space, language, memory, boundaries, fear and embrace of 'the other'. Furthermore, this exploratory meeting clarified the two aspects that were to be fully integrated in the study process from the outset: a) interdisciplinary work on ethnic identity and national identity in relation to Christian unity, drawing specifically on the resources of biblical studies, theology, church history, and the social sciences; and b) the witness from churches, councils of churches, and ecumenical study centres reflecting on these issues in their own local situation.

The planning meeting at **Cartigny, Switzerland (1998)** focused on the second of these two aspects. Criteria, procedures and locations were identified in order to establish a series of contextual projects or local self-studies, organised at the initiative of Faith and Order, but conducted ecumenically by churches who found themselves in ethnic or national conflict situations. For this purpose a common set of nine questions were developed in order to be addressed by all local self-studies, thereby enabling them to analyse their respective situations and the involvement of churches and denominations in such situations.⁴

³ Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 30 September – 7 October, *Matanzas, Cuba*, Faith and Order Paper No. 188, Geneva, Commission on Faith and Order, 2000, p. 59.

⁴ The common set of questions to be addressed in the local self-studies are as follows:

1. What churches are present in your situation? What is their relationship to the various parties in tension or conflict? What is their relationship to each other, and to church or other bodies overseas?
2. How far to the divisions (both confessional and social) within – and among – the churches reflect divisions within society as a whole?
3. How do the churches understand, and address, issues of ethnic identity in your situation? How do they understand ethnic diversity in relation to the "unity of humankind"?
4. How do they understand, and address, issues of national identity?
5. What do the churches understand to be their mission in your situation? How do they understand their role in overcoming tensions and conflict in society? What specific measures have they suggested in response to your situation?
6. Upon what resources in Christian tradition do the churches draw in order to interpret- and offer hope within – your situation? Has a vision of Christian unity been a helpful resource? Has the engagement of the churches brought them closer together, or been a source of further division?

Furthermore, and in view of the integrative approach adopted by the study process, this meeting also clarified the relevance of biblical, theological and social-scientific resources for the local self-studies as the churches seek to understand and respond to the challenges which face them. Following the Cartigny meeting, self-study projects were set up in Fiji, Sudan, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, and the USA; while some of these projects clearly involved an inter-faith dimension, others have sought to address the issue of racial identity within the study process.

Plans for the inter-disciplinary dimension of the study were taken further at another meeting convened in **Cartigny, Switzerland (2000)**. Through interaction with biblical scholars, church historians, theologians and social scientists, this consultation sought to identify – for each of these fields of enquiry – the key themes, methods of study, and persons to be involved from the churches and the ecumenical and academic communities. It was at this meeting that the issue of identities and boundaries emerged as an overarching theme, with the understanding that the notion of identity is both individual and collective, and that boundaries can play both positive and negative roles in respect of human identity. Participants, through papers and discussion, thus begun to examine how boundaries are set, and to what extent boundaries can be exclusive but also serve as points of contact with other communities. Several specific themes were highlighted as requiring further exploration at a later stage of the process, including: the ways in which Scripture relates ethnic and national identities to a common Christian identity; the role of church history in shaping perceptions of confessional identity, and in reinforcing or overcoming divisions among the churches; theological reflection on ethnic and national identities as part of the created order; the implications for human identity of Christ as divine and human; the notions of catholicity and particularity. Again, the importance of integrating the various aspects of the study, particularly its inter-disciplinary dimension to the local self-study projects, was emphasized during this consultation. Persons representing various aspects of the ETHNAT study have, for this reason, been present at each stage of the process, not only to exchange and reflect upon findings from the local self-studies, but in order to identify the biblical texts and theological issues which have proved most helpful in the various contexts.

The fourth meeting, held at the **Corrymeela Community, Northern Ireland (2001)**, brought substantial reports from three of the local self-studies that were nearing completion (Sudan, Fiji, Northern Ireland). An interim report from one of the other local self-studies (Sri Lanka) was also discussed. These reports were brought into dialogue at this meeting with biblical scholars, a theologian and a social scientist, in order to identify common themes in the self-study projects and to consider emerging issues for further study locally.

Direct engagement with biblical resources and scholarship has proved to be a prominent feature of the ETHNAT study from the outset, but was gathered together formally at a consultation held in **Bangor, Wales (2003)**. This was the first of two specialized consultations reflecting the inter-disciplinary aspect of the study. The aim of the Bangor consultation was to gain insights from biblical scholarship on issues of ethnicity and nationalism in relation to the unity of the Church by bringing together a group of biblical scholars who represented a wide variety of critical approaches, different confessional, regional and cultural contexts, but yet were united by a common understanding of their responsibility to the text as part of Scripture, to the Church and its life, and to the contexts in which the local churches find themselves. The participants had been given the freedom to choose their own biblical texts and topics for consideration, and although this methodological strategy led to some obvious gaps in the biblical material, the papers presented at the consultation yielded new perspectives on, and insights into, a number of Old Testament and New Testament texts in which issues pertinent to the ETHNAT study are paramount. Two clear groupings emerged from the papers, namely

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7. What external resources have the churches brought to bear on the situation? Have churches from elsewhere become involved and, if so, has this been helpful? Have church or secular organisations (for example, aid organisations) become involved and, if so, with what result?
 8. How has the churches' engagement helped to effect change in your local situation? What specific lessons have you learned about how the churches can help reduce tension and conflict, and promote a just peace, in your own context?
 9. What have the churches learned from their engagement in this process about the unity of the church? What, from your experience, does unity mean in your specific situation? What forms of unity best promote healing, peace and justice?

those dealing with 'The Enemy, Alienation – and Reconciliation' and those in the area of 'Building Identities, Belonging – and Salvation'. The main insights and themes that emerged from this consultation, and which serve as a contribution to the study process as a whole, are outlined in the Aide-Memoire made available to members of the Plenary Commission here in Kuala Lumpur.

The Bangor consultation also sought to bring the results of work carried out by biblical scholars into dialogue with the situations of ethnic and national conflicts analysed by the local self-studies. By identifying, examining and appropriating biblical passages and concepts of central importance in such circumstances, those present at the meeting, including representatives from the local self-studies, were able to identify background material that could be used for Bible studies. Prior to the consultation, a number of the participants had prepared material that could be used, together with other contributions, to produce a volume of Bible studies for use in local churches and congregations.

The most recent consultation in the ETHNAT study has been the second of our interdisciplinary meetings. Held in **Faverge, France (2004)** it brought together theologians and social scientists with the primary aim of gaining insights from these scholars on issues of ethnicity and nationalism in relation to the unity of the Church. A variety of theological and social-scientific methods (as well as confessional and cultural perspectives) were represented. A special effort was made to clarify the relationship between ethnicity and racism – a complex and difficult topic. There was also a certain emphasis on the topic of nationalism, as this, it was felt, had not been treated sufficiently in the study so far (this meant, for example, clarifying the relationship between 'nation' and 'state'). In the process it became possible to establish some links with the Leuvenberg (now Community of Protestant Churches in Europe) study on 'Church – People – State – Nation', and to gain an understanding of the church and political situation especially in Eastern Europe. The theological reflections focussed on the 'glory' (*doxa*) of God, developing this as the basis of a Christian vision of just holiness and as the true standard for the exercise of power. Thus God's glory challenges all abuse of power and all false claims to authority. In addition, the Christian understanding of baptism and the eucharist emerged as a challenge to the divisions of the world.

Publications and Future Work

The ETHNAT study process has now reached a stage of maturity where it is necessary to publish, or in certain cases circulate, the various local self-studies and the papers and results from the various consultations. This will not only amount to a contribution to research in the field, but will act as a stimulus to the study process at various levels and will serve as a documentation of the work of Faith and Order.

Two of the local self-studies have now been completed and are being published as separate volumes. It is therefore hoped that the two-page summary of the study from Fiji, which is available to Plenary Commission members here in Kuala Lumpur, will form part of the group discussions later today. In the case of Northern Ireland the final report shall be made available for publication during the first half of 2005, whereas the local self-study project from Sri Lanka, which has been delayed due to the current sensitive situation in that country, will also be completed early in 2005. Faith and Order continues to be informed about the progress and results of the study on racism currently being undertaken by the Churches Uniting in Christ in USA.

Negotiations are already under way to place the papers presented at the Bangor consultation, together with an introduction and some additional commissioned papers, with an appropriate publisher. Furthermore, a number of the papers presented at earlier stages of the study process (in Hawarden, Cartigny, Corrymeela and Faverge) will be gathered together for publication as a single volume during 2005.

What is also required, and corresponds to one of the central aims of the ETHNAT study, is the production of material for use in local churches and congregations, particularly for those finding themselves in such situations of tension and conflict where ethnicity and nationalism

are major factors. Such material would include insights and experiences from the study process, and, as discussed during the Bangor consultation, a series of Bible studies. Once again, it is hoped that members of Plenary Commission, through group discussions later today, can provide further reflection on the content and format of such materials.

A further task to be undertaken after this meeting of the Plenary Commission is to draw upon the various parts of the ETHNAT study. We need now to bring together the inputs, analyses, insights and others results from the consultations, local self-studies and planning meetings, together with the material arising from our discussions here in Kuala Lumpur. It is therefore envisaged that a small drafting group, to include representatives from the different aspects of the study process, will meet in March-April 2005 in order to produce a text that brings the results of this important study into a coherent whole.

NOTES

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